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ABSTRACT

The growing problem of English mother tongue competence is slowly being recognized by teachers in several disciplines, especially by teachers of translation. In a language degree course such as that at Heriot-Watt University (Edinburgh, Scotland), which specializes in teaching translating and interpreting, a high standard of mother tongue competence is essential. While the majority of students arrive in the Department of Languages with a good level of such competence, there are some who, in the early stages of the 4-year course, are in need of assistance. It would then seem highly desirable, if not essential, that any course in translating should be preceded by a "monolingual" text processing course designed specifically to improve the trainee translator's mastery of his/her mother tongue. In this paper, relevant features of the type of course offered at Heriot-Watt University are identified, and aspects of the apparent decline in mother tongue competence and how the Department of Languages is moving towards resolving the problem are considered. The paper concludes with a description of one of several exercises that have proven popular and successful among students. (KM)

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The Problem of Mother Tongue Competence in the Training of Translators

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1. Introduction

That there is a growing problem of English mother tongue competence is slowly being recognised, by teachers in several disciplines, and especially by teachers of translating. In a languages degree course such as that in Heriot-Watt University, which specialises in teaching translating and interpreting, a high standard of mother tongue competence is essential. While the majority of students arrive in the department with a good level of such competence, there are some who, in the early stages of the four year course, are in need of assistance.

I should like first of all to identify relevant features of the type of course we have at Heriot-Watt University; then consider aspects of the apparent decline in mother tongue competence. Following this I shall turn to one of the ways in which we, in the Department of Languages, are moving towards resolving the problem. I shall conclude with a description of one of several exercises which are proving popular among students, and successful.

1. The degree in Interpreting and Translating at Heriot-Watt University

Heriot-Watt University is one of three universities in Edinburgh. It has the only four

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year undergraduate course in Interpreting and Translating in Britain.[1] The degree is a specialist, vocational degree, producing professional linguists who follow various careers, of which 90% are course-related, and, therefore, require a very high standard of linguistic competence in foreign languages, and in English.

The University degree in Britain is not normally an end in itself and is usually followed by a period of further study or specialist training. The course in the Department of Languages therefore achieves two rather different purposes. It offers the possibility of obtaining a British university degree and at the same time acquiring specialist, professional skills.

Recruitment of students for the degree involves three distinct operations: of the 300 or so applicants, initial selection is carried out with reference to projected leaving certificate results and headteachers' assessments; each of the 120 potential candidates selected is invited for interview[2]; an offer is made to those considered suitable, in terms of entrance requirements for the degree stipulated by the department and the university. Numbers of students accepted for the course have, until recently, been limited to 40.

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[1] The Department also provides a range of other, joint or combined, degrees: International Business and Languages, and Mathematics, Chemistry, etc., with Languages.

[2] The interview is an integral part of the selection process. Although it is structured and conducted with infinite care, it is not always reliable as an indicator of the candidate's real abilities.
Figures given are approximate.

While the full four year undergraduate course[3] has the pedagogical advantage of receiving enthusiastic, young, future Europeans - straight from school in the majority of cases - a few of the students tend to be immature in their approach to language learning and evince little intellectual or technical curiosity about language. They seem to have little desire to retain information and subsequently bring it into active use. In the case of translating some retain habits or convictions acquired at school, believing for example that to do a translation it is enough to sit down with the foreign language text and a bilingual dictionary, or that there is only one good version - the teacher's. Most, if not all, of the students have 'done translation before'[4] so are disinclined to acquire a methodology, such as that provided in discourse analysis. Finally, and crucially, the students are working into their mother tongue, and it does not occur to them that they have very much to learn or to improve in this particular area.

From discussions with colleagues in institutes abroad with which we have exchanged students for over a quarter of a century, it appears that the problem of mother tongue competence is more widespread than we initially believed and that it poses similar problems for partner institutes. While this is reassuring in a negative sort of way - in that the problem is not confined to English native speakers - it naturally raises the question of how to resolve the matter, of how to tackle a complex problem of a pedagogical, and eventually a professional, nature.

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[3] There are other universities in Britain which offer Interpreting and Translating training but this takes the form of one year postgraduate courses.

[4] This is not a problem in teaching the novel discipline of interpreting, which students perceive as exciting, glamorous, international ...

It has been disconcerting, in second year translation classes, to find, frequently, that exchange students could offer a wider range of alternative lexis, grammar structures and style in English than could some of the English native speakers. These were not isolated occurrences which could be explained by attributing to exchange students an outstanding ability in English, better at times than that of a native speaker. Nor were the exchange students necessarily nationals of countries which produce speakers of English in such numbers and whose English is of such quality as to provoke the familiar English native speakers' remark about the lack of any need to learn a foreign language. It is to be hoped that when British students spend a year abroad they too can offer expertise in a foreign language that is at least equal to the mother tongue competence of for example good French, and other, native speakers.

2. Mother tongue competence and the training of translators

One of the reasons for the decline in mother tongue competence may reside in the fact that emphasis on communicative approaches to foreign language acquisition has achieved the excellent results it has at the expense of the mother tongue. To put slightly differently, has focus on the foreign language as both a means and an end cost the mother tongue dear? I am convinced that such emphasis has contributed to a decline in standards in mother tongue competence in translation classes. One of the problems for trainee translators is not so much foreign language competence as mother tongue competence.

What solutions can be implemented to achieve similar levels of competence in mother tongue and foreign language? The essential approach in the training of translators must surely be for teacher and student to put as much effort into mother tongue improvement

as is put into foreign language acquisition: to achieve a balance between the two. The mother tongue must not be neglected but attributed equal status and allocated equal time.

Whether they are trainee translators or following a less specialised language course, students should not be sitting in class passively listening - or not listening as the case may be - to fellow students translating a text line by line and hoping they will not be called upon to perform. Rather, they should be learning to understand the process of translating: suggesting alternative possibilities, selecting from them and justifying their choice in non-intuitive, objective terms.

In order to achieve this, the initial stage of the course requires to include study of English texts, applying the same techniques of discourse analysis which will be used when translating proper begins. Within the framework of a topic-based syllabus, students are introduced to the basic concepts and components of discourse analysis such as context and co-text, cohesion and coherence, text, intertext and intertextuality ... in other words, to the essential and interdependent components of any communicative act, written or oral.

By equipping trainee translators with such resources we are attempting to ensure that they are acquiring a metalanguage to describe the process of translating, applicable during their degree course and in a subsequent professional context. We are also seeking to develop the ability to evaluate the product - the translation - objectively, by application of impartial, practical criteria.

One of the various types of exercise in the text study course which follows the introductory discourse analysis course is translation evaluation. The students are asked to evaluate three translations produced by second year students under exam conditions, that is, with a time limit and without a dictionary. One of the three translations will have received an excellent mark, one a bare pass, and the third a fail. The students are evaluating what is virtually peer work and this seems to be one of the reasons they like the exercise.

The are asked to analyse and evaluate the work in preparation for class discussion. They are required to use the metalanguage acquired in discourse analysis classes to justify any critical judgement they offer. In class, evaluation is carried out by a group or groups and at this stage students are discussing alternatives, and going through the process of selection. Once again, they are required to justify their decisions. Then they are asked to place the texts in order of merit. This they manage to do with almost total accuracy.

At this point, students are given the original French text for the first time, and are asked to use discourse analysis techniques to analyse it.

Finally, the teams compare and contrast the source text and the best of the English translations, still using the metalanguage of discourse analysis and justifying objectively any assessment made. If they consider it appropriate they are encouraged to provide their own team target version. Hence, the students are learning to analyse, revise, and edit, working individually or in teams.

Conclusion

Professional translating standards require an impeccable level of competence in the target language. If a serious attempt is to be made to raise the level of mother tongue competence, and this with particular reference to translating skills, it would seem both logical and practical if trainee translators can acquire a similar set of resources for processing both source and target languages. Furthermore it would seem to be highly desirable, if not essential, that any course in translating should be preceded by a 'monolingual' text processing course, designed specifically to improve the trainee translator's mastery of his/her mother tongue.